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ARTICLES / СТАТЬИ

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Proletarian Credibility? Malevich's Russian Peasant Paintings during the First Five-Year Plan

During the years immediately before and after the 1917 October Revolution, the prominent Avant-Garde artist Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935) enjoyed renown in Russian art circles for his signature, abstract work. His nonobjective "Suprematist" style constituted one of the first models of purely abstract, non-representational painting in the modernist tradition of Western art. If the primary subject matter that Malevich's work was concerned with is geometric forms, the second most recognizable content of Malevich's paintings would be the Russian peasant. Not all of his work was abstract, and those paintings which do represent identifiable imagery have a notable tendency to favor rural subject matter, both landscapes and their inhabitants. In fact, Malevich began his career as a painter depicting peasant figures, prior to developing his signature style of abstraction in 1915. After his purely abstract period concluded in the mid-1920s, similar peasant themes reemerged in his work at the turn of the 1930s.[1]

While peasant imagery from early in Malevich's career largely reflects the concerns of a young artist grappling with West European art historical precedents adapted to a Slavic context, I contend that his later peasant works engaged with the complex set of historical and political circumstances of the early Stalinist era. Other scholars have explained how the artist's motivations for creating the later peasant works were multifaceted and related significantly to his philosophical treatises regarding the essential nature of art and humanity.[2] Another set of scholars has read these images as reactions to contemporary political events.[3]

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1. A previous version of this research was presented at the Agricultural History Society Annual Meeting in Banff, Alberta in June of 2013. My thanks to those who attended and commented upon this research in progress. Additional acknowledgement is due to Alexis Pogorelskin, Lisa Saltzman, Tim Harte, and Mey-Yen Moriuchi, as well as anonymous reviewers, who have all posed helpful questions and given critical suggestions to improve this project.

2. Adrian Barr, "From *Vozbuzhdenie* to *Oshchushchenie*: Theoretical Shifts, Nova Generatsiia, and the Late Paintings," *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Confer-*

In this essay, rather than focusing on personal or political motivations, I will explain how Malevich's late-career images of peasants operated within contemporary social debate on critical political issues. Malevich's images of peasants reflect traditional forms of peasant dress and agriculture even while employing Futurist stylizations of the human form. Yet despite the ubiquity of peasant imagery in contemporary state propaganda, neither the past nor the future of Malevich's peasants resembled the artist's present, with the industrialization of Soviet agriculture and the attendant transformation of peasants into laborers. I will argue that his images subverted propagandistic imagery by manipulating the vocabulary of peasant figures that was employed in Soviet popular visual culture.

The parameters of my inquiry are bounded by the years 1928 to 1932. Just prior to this period, in 1927, Malevich found himself conducting a long-awaited tour to exhibit his work in European cities, first in Warsaw and then in Berlin. While in Germany, Soviet authorities abruptly recalled him home.[4] Prior to this journey, he had been largely preoccupied with pedagogical initiatives, various forms of production art that bridged design and Suprematism (including a mass-manufactured tea set), and three-dimensional experimentation that produced hybrid Suprematist sculptures/architectural models. In the year following his return to the Soviet Union, he resumed his practice of easel painting in a sustained manner for the first time in ten years. Between 1928 and 1932, Malevich created a diverse body of work represented by at least seventy-six new paintings, many of which depicted peasants. In 1932, at the end of the period under consideration, Malevich's painting activities turned to a distinct and coherent cycle of works, with a focus upon detailed portraits, mostly of

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ence in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth (London: The Pindar Press, 2007), pp. 203-20. Charlotte Douglas, "Beyond Suprematism – Malevich: 1927-33," *Soviet Union* (1980): 214-27.

3. Jean-Claude Marcadé, "Malévitch face à Staline," *L'Œil* (March 1998). Gerry Souter, *Malevich: Journey to Infinity* (New York: Parkstone Press International, 2008). Hilton Kramer, "Art, Revolution, and Kasimir Malevich," *The New Criterion* (November 1990). (http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Art--revolution--and-Kazimir-Malevich-5230, accessed 1/24/13.) Reprinted in Hilton Kramer, *The Triumph of Modernism: The Art World, 1987-2005* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), pp. 29-33.

4. Just one month into an anticipated five-month-long duration of a 1927 exhibition of his works in Berlin, Malevich received a letter which requested his return to Russia. It is possible that this letter may have responded to a request for an extension of his visa; it appears that the artist's petition may have raised Soviet authorities' fear of his emigration, particularly given the rampant exodus of prominent avant-garde artists from the Soviet Union in the previous decade. Recollections of Hans von Reisen, reprinted in I. A. Vakar and T. N. Mikhienko, author-editors, *Malevich o sebe: Sovremenniki o Maleviche* (Moscow: RA, 2004), 2: 374. Charlotte Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 34.

close friends and family, with easily recognizable (one might even say "realist" or "classical") visages and highly stylized, color-blocked clothing placed upon solid white or black backgrounds.

As opposed to other periods during his career, such as his cubist period, his alogical period, and his Suprematist period, which generally reflected internal stylistic unity, his prolific production during the years between 1928 and 1932 represented a widely scattered, eclectic stylistic approach and wide-ranging choice of subject matter. During this span of half a decade, his paintings generally took three non-exclusive trajectories: one in terms of aesthetic philosophy (particularly in works which continued to explore the Suprematist geometry of his last major cycle of paintings), one in terms of style (emulations of other well-known European modern artists), and one in terms of subject matter (depictions of the Russian peasantry and rural landscapes). The first of these categories has been extensively investigated by scholars such as Charlotte Douglas, Adrian Barr, and Dmitri Sarabianov.[5] Elena Basner has published important research regarding the second.[6] Such scholars have established a body of research into Malevich's philosophy and writing that explains the continuities of the late-life works with the rest of his oeuvre. Their foci have generally expanded beyond the period from 1928-1932, which I have chosen for my parameters because of the prevalence of the third of these categories: subject matter, a topic whose bibliographic history I will explore in-depth in my next section. The scholars whose attention has focused upon the first two categories demonstrate that what Malevich did in the last seven years of his life was not at all a contradiction or retreat from his earlier discoveries, but rather a further development of those experiments.

However, the question of subject matter has remained largely unaddressed in a sustained, critical manner within the scholarly literature. In the previously mentioned literature, we find the approach to bracket the artist's late work in terms of stylistic tendencies towards Suprematist geometry or European Impressionism, as well as to contextualize his oeuvre in terms of his contemporary philosophy of art, as explicated in a se-

5. Barr, "From *Vozbuzhdenie* to *Oshchushchenie*." Douglas, "Beyond Suprematism." Dmitrii Sarabianov, "Malevich at the Time of the 'Great Break'," *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990), pp. 142-47. Dmitrii Sarabianov, "Zhivopis' Kazimira Malevicha," *Kazimir Malevich Zhivopis' Teoriia* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1993), pp. 9-176.

6. Elena Basner, "Impressionism in the Art and Teaching of Kazimir Malevich," Yevgenia Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Personality and School, Academic papers from the conferences accompanying the exhibitions* Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum *and* Malevich's Circle *(Russian Museum, St Petersburg, 2000)* (St. Petersburg: The State Russian Museum, Palace Editions, 2000), pp. 70-73.

ries of articles in the Ukrainian serial *Nova generatsiia* from 1928 to 1930. But neither of these approaches offers a complete interpretation of a painting such as *Women Reapers* (Figure 1) from 1928-29. This painting represents a stylistic anomaly within Malevich's late work as currently understood in art historical literature, for it borders on a representative style much closer to Realism than most of his other work from this era. Thus, it remains a problematic work to interpret within the stylistic and philosophical approaches. Nonetheless, it represents subject matter that overwhelmingly unifies a significant subset of works produced by the artist during this era.

Regardless of questions of style or aesthetic philosophy, the fact cannot be ignored that, when Malevich returned to his easel in 1928, he was exceedingly occupied with the subject of the Russian peasant. Many of the artist's earliest exhibited paintings from the 1910s depicted peasants, and a number of his later works represented reappraisals of those earlier paintings. However, such variations on early work only constitute a handful of the later peasant paintings, no more than 15 percent. Although there exists a complex relationship between the late and early peasant paintings, to address fully how the late reproductions reconfigure their prototypes well exceeds the parameters of this essay. Such a discussion would require a close examination of the sets of replicated paintings and their later recreations, as well as a broader contextualization of Malevich's artistic practices regarding reproduction and duplication of artistic works. Moreover, such a project might perilously veer towards questions of the artist's personal motivations, which I seek to sidestep.

What I will consider are some remarkable correspondences between this subject matter and the paintings' cultural and political contexts during the early Stalinist era. My approach prioritizes correspondences of the "texts" (in a semiotic sense) of Malevich's works with the "texts" of contemporary visual culture over correspondences with the texts of Malevich's own writings. Such an approach is deliberate and predicated upon a Barthesian deconstruction of authorial integrity, drawing upon the theoretical foundations established by semiotic art historians such as Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson.[7] My aim with such an approach is to create a sense of meaning regarding Malevich's peasant subject matter within a set of contextual elements that require their own unique interpretive strategies and that might otherwise be missed when using brackets of style,

7. Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 73 no. 2 (June 1991): 174-208.

stated authorial intentions, or any number of other available sets of (con)texts and associated interpretive strategies.[8]

What makes Malevich's late-career depictions of peasantry and rural landscapes particularly noteworthy is that within an artistic milieu in which the forerunners of the classic Soviet style of Socialist Realism were rapidly gaining exclusive favor, Malevich was painting works that, at immediate face value, might be read as employing proletariat-oriented subject matter. To be perfectly clear, Malevich's work did not in any way conform to the aesthetic standards of AKhRR (the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia), the artists organization increasingly favored by the state for its stance on the appropriately realist depiction of Soviet life in the visual arts. When Socialist Realism became the standard for Soviet artistic production in the mid-to-late 1930s, its tenets were founded upon the artistic direction espoused by AKhRR, not Malevich. While it could be argued that Malevich's late peasant paintings reflected something essential about the spirit of the people and nation, his works failed to espouse the ideological commitment and alignment with socialist causes which constituted fundamental requirements for quality in artistic production according to AKhRR and, later, Socialist Realism.[9]

Nonetheless, despite this divergence in artistic agendas, as well as episodes of rough treatment at the hands of Soviet authorities during the period in question,[10] neither Malevich nor his works were locked away in his studio or apartment in the years after he returned from Berlin. He displayed his newly-created paintings at well-attended public exhibitions, both in a 1929 retrospective exhibition as well as in significant group exhibitions at the most prominent state museum venues in Leningrad and Moscow, most notably at the 1933 "Artists of the RSFSR over Fifteen Years" exhibition. As such, they remained a part of public visual discourse. Particularly in light of these works' depictions of rural life, they can be discussed within the context of a much broader public conversa-

8. For example, there is much work that can and has been done regarding the formal associations of these works with Suprematist compositions as well as with the compositional strategies of conventional Russian Orthodox icons. See, for example, Giorgio Cortenova and Evgenia Petrova, *Kazimir Malevich e le Sacre Icone Russe: Avanguardia e Tradizioni* (Milan: Electa, 2000).

9. These three primary characteristics of Socialist Realist work are outlined by Leonid Heller, in "A World of Prettiness," *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 52-53.

10. In addition to Malevich's abrupt recall from Berlin, when he returned to Russia, he was subjected to interrogation simply for the reason that he had been exposed to the contaminating influences of Western art. Andréi Nakov, *Kazimir Malewicz: Catalogue Raisonné* (Paris: Adam Biro, 2002).

tion within visual culture about peasant identity at a moment during which this identity was itself highly contested within Soviet society.

Paintings of peasants in the early Stalinist Soviet Union were accompanied by a host of socially-conditioned connotations. 1928 marked the beginning of the most sweeping reforms to affect the lives of Russia's rural population since the abolition of serfdom in 1861. In 1928, Stalin instituted what is now known as the First Five-Year Plan. This plan comprised a list of goals designed to advance the Soviet Union economically to the point of military and industrial self-sufficiency. It demanded improvements in efficiency in everything from the work environment to living conditions and household management, along with rapid industrialization across Soviet society, in particular within the realm of agriculture. As part of the First Five-Year Plan, a strategy for the collectivization of peasant land holdings was implemented. Under collectivization, the state abolished private ownership of the means of agricultural production. Ownership and control over land, buildings, livestock, tools, agricultural products, even seeds for the following season, were all placed in the hands of government-organized collectives. Peasants throughout the Soviet Union were at first exhorted and then forcibly compelled to abandon traditional ways of working the land.

Stalin's economic argument for initiating collectivization – leading to what Stalin's primary political ally during the NEP Era, Nikolai Bukharin, termed "military-feudal exploitation" of the peasantry – lay in taking advantage of grain production to supply the capital for industrialization. The peasant had to pay; peasants became agricultural laborers at the mercy of the state. The processes of collectivization were critical to the establishment of Communism. Collectivization resulted in massive protests, extensive deportations, and widespread famine which led to the deaths of millions. Within the context of discussing Malevich's works, it is notable that the devastating effects of collectivization hit Ukraine particularly hard, because Malevich maintained a deep connection to this geographic area and its peoples. He spent his childhood moving between towns in rural Ukraine, and he was teaching in Kiev during the early years of the First Five-Year Plan.

I. Bibliographic History

The coincidence of the collectivization process and Malevich's turn to peasant subject matter in 1928 has not been lost upon several scholars of the Russian Avant-Garde. The political circumstances of Stalin's "Revolution from Above" allow for ready-made interpretations of the peasants within Malevich's works as symbolic of the contemporary plight of the peasant classes. With so many of Malevich's paintings from this period

depicting peasants, his images have often been read as commentary upon the persecution of this social class. In this section, I will detail the arguments that have been made about these paintings with specific regard to their political context.

For example, Jean-Claude Marcadé contends that Malevich's late peasant paintings represent a sparsely camouflaged political protest against Soviet authority. Marcadé interprets the traditional peasant beard in paintings such as *Haymaking* (1928-1929) (Figure 2) as a muzzle, with the fields behind the peasant signifying a "quasi-idyllic" scene upon which Soviet authority encroached. He states, "Malevich was the only painter who demonstrated the dramatic situation of the Russian and Ukrainian peasantry at the moment of the criminal forced collectivization," indicating the representation of contemporary events on Malevich's canvases.[11] For Marcadé, Malevich's late-career paintings of peasants assert an explicit political agenda.

Andrew Wachtel also associates Malevich's works with their contemporary political context. He contends that the artist's late-career peasant paintings produce a prescient vision of "unprecedented suffering" by depicting "the reality of the world around him."[12] He proposes that Malevich should be included within a notable group of the artists who "expressed the quintessential truth about Russia's cruel experiences in the twentieth century . . . [and who] attempted to find an adequate expression for Soviet reality."[13] Wachtel consistently evokes this notion of "reality" as indicative of traumatic social experiences in Russian and Soviet history. His association of this "reality" with respect to Malevich's work borders perilously close to aligning the Avant-Garde artist with a style Malevich most abhorred – the social realism of the nineteenth-century *Peredvizhniki* or Wanderers. Wachtel suggests that the value of Malevich's late works depends on the representation of contemporary existence and the expression of personal sentiment.

In a 2008 monograph, Gerry Souter presented a hyperbole of a conventionalized story told about Malevich's relationship to Soviet authorities.[14] This tale combines the modernist archetype of the artist-as-genius with the Cold-War era archetype of the persecuted Soviet hero. Souter contends that Malevich's later works manifest survival tactics to conceal his motivations and intentions from the state, specifically, according to

11. Marcadé, "Malévitch face à Staline," p. 64.

12. Andrew Wachtel, "Meaningful Voids: Facelessness in Platonov and Malevich," in *Russian Literature, Modernism and the Visual Arts*, ed. Catriona Kelly and Stephen Lovell (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 259, 270-72.

13. Wachtel, "Meaningful Voids," p. 250.

14. Souter, *Malevich: Journey to Infinity*, p. 7.

Souter, the Secret Police. Such an assertion defies any known concrete historical documentation, and it reflects Souter's nostalgic, post-Cold-War attitudes far more than Malevich's early Stalinist context.

An approach which is likewise inflected far more by Western than Soviet politics can be found in the criticism of conservative American critic Hilton Kramer. In a 1990 article, Kramer asserts that Malevich's peasants represented a base capitulation to Bolshevik dictates of the principles of Socialist Realism.[15] He declared of Malevich's 1928-1929 painting, *Women Reapers* (Figure 1), that, "Not only does the painting represent an abject surrender to Stalin's newly proclaimed doctrine of Socialist Realism, but its very subject matter – those well-fed peasant women harvesting the grain in what looks like a pastoral idyll – is the most cynical propaganda."[16] He explicitly cites the coincidence of this work's date of creation with Soviet collectivization policies and their horrific consequences.

Kramer's contextualization of Malevich's late peasant works with respect to Stalin's collectivization program is accurate, but his assertion that these works "represent an abject surrender" to Socialist Realist "doctrine" is entirely anachronistic, for such a doctrine was not "proclaimed" until 1934. Nevertheless, Kramer's rejection of Malevich's work as "the most cynical propaganda" betrays a gross misunderstanding of both Malevich's and Socialist Realist styles and agendas.[17] As I will explain in a later section, if Malevich's peasant images have anything to do with Soviet propaganda, it is through subversion rather than complicity.

While such historians and critics have often interpreted the peasants within Malevich's works according to Soviet political history, others have rejected explanations of these paintings in terms of the policy of collectivization. For example, Irina Vakar and Masha Chlenova argue that because Malevich developed the iconographic and stylistic program of his later images of peasants almost certainly prior to 1929, the content of these paintings cannot have borne upon the tragic events that would befall the peasant population in the years to come.[18] Former Malevich student Konstantin Rozhdestvensky asserted in a 1991 interview that these paintings were, "not directly in some sort of conversation" with the issue of collectivization.[19] According to Rozhdestvensky, the tragedy of the peasant situation may have existed concurrently, but it would not be appropriate to

15. Kramer, "Art, Revolution, and Kasimir Malevich."

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. Chlenova cites Vakar's unpublished research on this topic. Masha Chlenova, "Transformations of the Avant-Garde in Soviet Public Culture, 1928-1933" Ph.D. dissertation (Columbia University, 2010), pp. 241-42.

19. Vakar and Mikhienko, *Malevich o sebe*, 2: 305.

make causal connections between art and political issues. As previously noted, scholars such as Douglas and Barr avoid the peasant question almost entirely, relegating any tenuous possible connections between the content of Malevich's paintings and contemporary life as so distant from the artist's stated intentions that they remain irrelevant to a serious art historical discussion of these works.

And, indeed, theories which posit Malevich's paintings of peasants as commentary on a change in the policy of the Soviet state toward the peasantry do not work chronologically. Vakar and Chlenova have raised this issue in terms of the artist's stylistic development, but investigations into the artist's sketchbooks are not necessary to make this conclusion. Quite simply, when Malevich began to paint these images of peasants in 1928, it was several years before the extremely detrimental effects of collectivization took hold, to say nothing of common public knowledge of these effects. I would assert that the interpretation of these works as opinionated observations about the persecuted peasant population can be made only in hindsight.

Nevertheless, Malevich's production of peasant-themed works was hardly divorced from his contemporary situation. I posit that these works reflect a context that extends beyond the political moment into wider questions of peasant identity. Of the works Malevich created between 1928 and 1932, thirty-four out of seventy-six paintings, or 45 percent, explicitly depict peasants and rural landscapes. Another seventeen works, or an additional 22 percent, experiment with the same formal artistic questions that the peasant images address, with ambiguity as to the possible peasant identity of the figures. In other words, we can bracket up to two thirds (67 percent) of the works he created during this five-year period as reflecting peasant subject matter, through the depiction of forms of rural landscapes and their peasant inhabitants, some more ambiguously than others. While this preoccupation with subject matter may not reflect explicit political commentary upon peasant collectivization, the sheer prevalence of the peasant figure within Malevich's works from this era cannot be completely extricated from its historical context.

II. Malevich's Peasant Iconography

In this section I will examine the semiotic associations of Malevich's conventionalized vocabulary of peasant figures. In performing such a reading, I am expressly ignoring Malevich's insistence that "the 'non-objective' arts [of which he considered his own paintings emblematic] have had to rid themselves of . . . the entire material side of everyday life," and that "the influence of economic, political, religious and utilitari-

an phenomena on art is the disease of art."[20] According to his own contemporary writings, published in *Nova generatsiia* between 1928 and 1930, Malevich's own words would indicate that he believed regardless of whatever subject matter he might choose, because of the "non-objective" nature of his painting practice, his works would nevertheless have nothing to do with "everyday life," in other words, the lives and considerations of the contemporary world. In fact, in the conclusion of the first article of this series, he asserts that, "Our contemporaries must understand *that life will not be the content of art, but rather that art must become the content of life, since only thus can life be beautiful*."[21] By reading iconographic content in Malevich's works from this era, I am taking the artist to task regarding his own work. I am arguing that what he proposes requires a deliberate and non-intuitive blindness on his own and his viewers' parts to see the unavoidable, obvious life within the content of his art.

I make my reading based on the assumption that neither Malevich nor his viewers could escape the semiotic significations of his forms of peasants. These forms function as signs within con(texts). As Bal and Bryson demonstrate, when intertextuality, whereby texts and signs unavoidably refer to other texts and signs in perpetuity, is taken into account, the appropriated sign, "because it is a sign, comes with meaning."[22] And furthermore, whether or not the artist wishes to employ that meaning, the artist (and viewer) "will inevitably have to deal with it."[23] Therefore it is important to explain how these forms functioned iconographically, so that we can consider how Malevich or his viewers might have "dealt with" such signification.

An example of a painting from this era that explicitly depicts peasants and rural landscapes is *Women Reapers* from 1928-29 (Figure 1). There are a multitude of visual elements in this work that signify the peasant identity of its figures and their purportedly "natural" setting laboring on the outskirts of a rural village. The central figure holds a sickle in her clenched hand, momentarily suspended from its habitual slicing of sheaths from the field behind her. The peasant woman on the left turns her back to the viewer mid-bundling, while the woman on the right lays down a sheath on the ground. The women's clothes sit upon their bodies stiffly and hang from their sides like the homespun, line-dried linen of

20. K. S. Malevich, "Painting and the Problem of Architecture," *Essays on art 1915-1933*, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, ed. Troels Andersen (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc. 1972), 2: 8-9, 14.

21. Malevich, "Painting and the Problem of Architecture," pp. 17-18.

22. Bal and Bryson "Semiotics and Art History," p. 207.

23. *Ibid.*

traditional peasant attire. Their feet are wrapped in traditional Russian peasant bast shoes made from birch bark, covering a protective and warming layer of bulky woolen socks. In the background we see the landscape of rural Russia or Ukraine, with its wide swaths of fields rolling one upon another, punctuated by occasional cottonwoods. A hill with a small town at the top rises in the distance, with a barely-distinguishable blue-dome-topped white church at its center.

Because of its depiction of peasants momentarily paused in their work, this painting immediately recalls mid-nineteenth-century peasant-themed works by Jules Breton, Gustave Courbet, and Jean-François Millet, as well as by Russian artists of the *Peredvizhniki* movement who developed a corresponding Russian style of realism and who frequently depicted peasants in their own work. Malevich's derision for such realists is well known and documented in his writings. He wrote in 1915, "I have . . . fished myself out of the rubbishy slough of academic art," and "The realist academists are the savage's last descendants. They are the ones who go about in the worn-out robes of the past."[24] Russian Avant0gardists such as Malevich and his compatriot Natalia Goncharova, who also painted numerous works depicting the Russian peasantry, categorically refused the standards of nineteenth-century realists, placing themselves in unqualified opposition to styles espoused by contemporary art school professors.

Nonetheless, much of the work of artists of the Russian Avant-Garde retained the subject matter of the peasantry. Such works were united by an inclination to highlight the simple, natural origins of rural life, untainted by urban encroachment, corruption, or pollution. This attitude is manifest as much in works such as Millet's *The Gleaners* (1857) and Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* (1885) as it is in the peasant images created by Malevich and Goncharova. Though the stylistic differences between Millet, Van Gogh, and the Russian Avant-Garde remain substantial, each of these examples demonstrates a focus within the subject matter that reveals common ancestry. To represent peasant life was hardly the sole purview of realist painters, but rather a subject matter which united painters of a modern, industrialized era regardless of stylistic tendencies.

Just as Malevich's abstract Suprematist work at the height of his career in the 1910s had touched the heart of the sensation of reality (as he eloquently expressed in 1915, "I have destroyed the lampshade of the horizon and escaped from the circle of objects . . ."),[25] Malevich's paintings

24. Kazimir Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism, 1915," *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, ed. and trans. John E. Bowlt, revised and enlarged edition (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), pp. 118, 124.

25. Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism," p. 118.

of peasants reflected modernist proclivities (proclivities that were hardly alien to his proto-Socialist Realist counterparts) to identify the peasantry and rural life as an alternative route to accessing fundamental and universal truths of existence. Primitivist influences on the work of the Russian avant-garde derive from a similar source. The primitive way of life of simple folk who purportedly preserved the ways of the past was perceived as providing a touchstone to the primeval, or at least pre-industrial, nature of human existence.

Many of the iconographic elements that signify peasant identity in *Women Reapers* can also be found in works like *Girls in a Field*, also from 1928-29 (Figure 3), but these iconographic elements have been geometrically and chromatically abstracted in accordance with the stylistic approach of the painting, which diverges from that of *Women Reapers*. We find the same form of peasant bast shoes in *Girls in a Field*, but they are rendered in bright unblended tones of yellow and blue, rather than the verisimilar brown of the *Women Reapers'* shoes. The girls' clothes represent the same skirts and shirts worn by the women reapers, although here the fashions have been rendered as sharp geometric forms that resemble metallic armor more so than homespun linen. Even more than the women reapers, the three girls stand utterly motionless, frozen in physiologically stable positions. They are solid and immovable, an impenetrable flank signifying the endurance of the peasant character and evoking visual associations with the formal configurations of ancient Russian icons depicting groups of saints.

There are several predominant means by which Malevich signifies the peasantry and rural landscapes in his late-career works. These range from something as simple as the title of the work (*Women Reapers* or *Haymaking*) to the clothing and hair of the subjects, as well as various objects or attributes employed by those subjects. It also includes the landscapes in which they are placed. Depending upon the painting, these landscapes, attributes, objects, and clothing or hairstyles are more or less ambiguous in referring to the peasantry; if they are included in explicit depictions of peasants in some of Malevich's works from this era, in others they may also be employed with less symbolic resonance, yet the visual forms remain similar.

Regarding clothing, male peasants in Malevich's images are depicted wearing characteristic tunics that are belted at the waistline. We can see this, for example, in the image *Haymaking* (Figure 2). The peasant tunic was clearly an appealing geometric form for the artist, because it allowed him to break the composition of the male body into a distinctive and unusual geometric configuration. The trapezoid created by the bottom half of the tunic below the beltline allowed for an extra geometric element to be

added to the typical male figural form of legs, arms, and torso. This made for a conventionalized figure that was no longer simply male, but specifically a male peasant.

Peasant women in Malevich's painterly vocabulary tend to wear a simple, collarless shirt, usually long-sleeved, and a below-the-knee-length skirt, as in *Girls in a Field*. Peasant women are notably distinguishable from explicitly urban women, the latter of which always wear more elaborate and fashionable clothing in Malevich's works from this era, be that in the form of collars, hats, or parasols. An example of an urban (working-class) woman can be found in the work, *Flower Seller* from 1930 (Figure 4), where the central female figure is wearing a tailored shirt with a white collar, cuffs, and beltline, as well as a brimmed hat and even earrings. Working-class women from rural origins, on the other hand, possess no such details or accessories for their clothing, which is simplified down to its most basic forms.

Additionally, the figures in Malevich's images can oftentimes be identified as peasants because of the form of their hair, or the head coverings. For men, the characteristic beard of the traditional Orthodox believer in images such as *Haymaking* constitutes the central compositional element of several works from this era. For women, the head covering, rather than the form of the hair, helped to signify peasant identity. In *Women Reapers*, a blue head scarf covers the head of the woman on the right. The woman in the center wears what could be read as a yellow head covering, or alternatively as hair, the form of which ambiguously merges with white clouds in the sky behind it, producing a sort of aureole, similar to the light that would surround the head of a saint upon an Orthodox icon.

In traditional Russian peasant attire, the headscarf was always tied underneath the chin. However, not all of Malevich's female peasants wear headscarves, and those that do oftentimes do not have them tied underneath the chin – or it remains ambiguous how the scarf is tied, or if the scarf exists at all. In this respect, Malevich's peasant women retain the ambiguity that was so characteristic of the artist's work as a whole. In fact, in only one composition produced in the 1928-1932 period, titled *Harvesting. Study for the Painting* (1928-1929, Russian Museum Ж-9387), a below-the-chin headscarf is explicitly denoted. In every single other composition depicting women, the head scarf is either ambiguous or absent. The question of the headscarf is significant because at this moment the headscarf's orientation indicated important political identities, a topic I will address in my next section. The fact that these works retained significant ambiguity with respect to such politically-fraught signifiers is characteristic of the overall ambiguity demonstrated in Malevich's late peasant works as a whole.

Additionally, Malevich's peasant subjects frequently carry agricultural implements. For example, in *Haymaking*, the central figure holds a sickle in one hand and a bucket in another. The central figure in *Woman with a Rake* (1932-1933, Tretiakov Gallery 22571) holds the titular attribute as a central component in the compositional structure of the work. These attributes eliminate any ambiguity as to the peasant identity of the figures.

Last, multicolored striping of the fields in works like *Girls in a Field* is an unmistakable motif that characterizes Malevich's later work and representations of rural landscapes. It likely evoked in viewers' minds a specific agricultural practice that had organized Russian village life for centuries prior to collectivization. In this practice, the village commune or *mir* divided fields in strips and allocated them according to the number of adults living in each family. This arrangement resulted in thin swaths of land running parallel to each other and cultivated by different families, each planting different crops. As opposed to the large fields of Soviet monoculture, traditional Russian peasant agriculture resulted in a landscape that was ruled by long-running parallel lines. Such lines created a visual effect that Malevich adopted for his paintings and that unambiguously signified pre-Stalinist peasant farming practices.

Between the names of works; the attire, hair, and attributes of their figures; as well as their landscape backgrounds, much can be identified in the set of paintings that Malevich created between 1928 and 1932 that signified rural, peasant life. Such subject matter would have unavoidably generated recognition through iconographic tropes within the minds of contemporary viewers. Regardless of whatever else they may have seen in these paintings, it is undeniable that they must have seen, in the way that we can only recognize that which we have already seen before and made sense of, forms of peasants. While these symbolic associations resonate with a modern tradition of painting in reaction to industrialization, they also evoke particular inflections of meaning within Soviet society at this moment – a topic to which I will next turn.

III. Malevich and Peasantry in Popular Visual Culture

In contrast to others' interpretations, my contention is that Malevich's paintings of peasants do reflect contemporary Soviet political existence, but they are not a reaction to collectivization policy. I would argue that they do not represent politically-charged commentary upon collectivization, in contrast to Kramer's and others' interpretations of these works. I interpret Malevich's paintings from this period as demonstrative of the wider cultural discussion of the identity and role of the peasantry within Soviet culture, rather than a narrow reflection of a single political program. Collectivization was simply one aspect of the political picture of

this moment. I propose that that the peasant imagery in these works remains in conversation with the visual vocabulary of Soviet popular culture in the late 1920s. Malevich's works may not be entirely devoid of political charge, but whatever political resistance they might pose, it is one that neutralizes, if not subverts, contemporary propaganda iconography.

The form of the Russian peasant played a prominent role in 1920s Soviet visual culture. For example, a porcelain chess set created by N. Ya. Dan'ko and A .A. Skvortsov in 1925 for the State Porcelain Factory dramatized the dialectical struggle between communism and capitalism (Figure 5). Two flanks of largely agrarian-themed red game pieces take on a set of white and black chain-bound, effeminate pawns. The white pieces are ruled by a skull-headed, leopard-fur-clad king, while the red queen piece is a blithely daydreaming Russian peasant. Her red pawns are robust Russian peasant men clad in traditional collarless tunics. Their hair is parted in the middle in a bowl-type cut, similarly to Malevich's conventionalized depictions of the hair of peasant men. This chess set reiterates a broad cultural vocabulary that associated the Russian peasant figure with the victory of the proletarian masses in achieving Socialist utopia. The set constituted a tangible object that signified the interdependent union between the peasants and the proletariat, characterized in the vocabulary of the NEP Era as "*smychka*."

Popular posters and postcards also addressed the question of the identity of the Russian peasant. Peasants figured prominently in mass-produced posters and other publications from the mid-1920s onwards as inseparable counterparts to industrial laborers.[26] In such graphic works, the paired figures from agriculture and industry represented the figural equivalent of the Soviet symbol's sickle linked to the hammer.

As Victoria Bonnell has demonstrated, at the end of the 1920s, Soviet political poster artists engaged in a concerted campaign to create a new iconography of the rural woman.[27] This new rural woman was positioned as the antithesis of an iconographic motif that derived from popular culture prior to the Revolution. This type, the conventionalized *baba*, was a hearty peasant grandmother. After the Revolution, her ample, fertile form colloquially signified ignorance and resistance to change.

In traditional folk iconography, peasant women typically appeared as hearty, healthy emblems of fertility, with wide hips and ample breasts. Such imagery posed a serious problem for Bolshevik propagandists. For

26. Multiple examples of such pairings can be found in Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997).

27. *Ibid.*

many urban Bolshevik sympathizers, the iconography of the hearty peasant woman symbolized the stereotypical *baba*, a distinctively pejorative appellation for a woman, referring to the perceived backwardness and ignorance of peasant life.[28] The connotation of *baba* evoked an image of a closed-minded, parsimonious woman, who routinely withstood the brutality of her husband, priests, and (tsarist) governmental authority figures. The stereotypical peasant woman, in the minds of many urbanites, hardly constituted a heroic figure who solidly bore the elements and the vicissitudes of time and, conjoined with industrial workers, could lead the way to Socialism. With bulging breasts and a hearty laugh, the *baba* served on certain levels as the embodiment of nourishment, protection, and fertility, but she certainly was not emblematic of intelligence or enlightened political awareness.

In order to undermine popularly-held notions of the character of the matriarchal peasant figure, around 1929 Soviet political poster artists attempted to create a new iconography of the female peasant, one whose image embodied the antithesis of the conventionalized *baba*.[29] These posters, as Bonnell has pointed out, served to reassign connotation to the idea of the "peasant woman," from hearty, fertile mother to strong, modern, and enfranchised worker.[30] With short hair and a scarf tied behind her neck (as opposed to under her chin), a slim figure, and understated breasts, she resembled nothing more so than a Soviet factory worker. A tractor replaced her characteristic attribute, the sickle; she called out to her fellow peasant women to come join the collective farm which would emancipate them from the dark, dank, smoky peasant hut and serve them food in a cafeteria. The collective would provide them with state-of-the-art childcare and allow them time to educate themselves.[31] The *kolkhoznitsa*, or female collective farm worker, would come to represent during the 1930s the quintessential embodiment of Russian womanhood. The iconic *kolkhoznitsa* thus embodied a spirit of industriousness, initiative, prosperity, and enrichment supported by communal endeavor and efficiency. She maintained boundless strength and stamina despite the most trying of circumstances. Her hard work was rewarded with pride in a job

28. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

29. Prior to about 1930, the peasant was typically depicted in Soviet posters exclusively as a bearded man clothed in a homespun shirt tied around the waist; rarely was the peasant woman depicted, and when she was, she was always a contingent figure, placed in a composition with a male counterpart – peasant or factory worker – or, if only female figures were depicted, she was always accompanied by a (usually short-haired) female factory worker. *Ibid.*, pp. 79-99.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 101-23.

31. See illustration 3.7 in Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*.

well done, as well as with independence from traditional women's responsibilities.

An important set of cultural texts which contextualize Malevich's late-career paintings of peasants consisted of popular visual cultural artifacts that responded not to collectivization, but to wider Bolshevik efforts to transform the identity of rural people from peasants into agricultural laborers. These artifacts consisted of posters, newspaper photographs, pamphlets, films, and other forms of propagandistic visual culture. Soviet propaganda promoting the identity of the *kolkhoznitsa* appeared concurrently with the rise of collectivization, but there remains an important distinction of visibility which might easily be overlooked. From a retrospective point of view, we may be fully cognizant of this concurrence, and we can examine the direct correlation between the political agenda, propagandistic imagery, and the subsequent economic and humanitarian catastrophe that resulted from collectivization policies. Living in the moment of that catastrophe, however, the full historical picture that has been narrated since would not have been so clearly visible nor so neatly defined. While the popular visual tropes of peasant figures would have been difficult to avoid seeing at the turn of the 1930s in Leningrad, where Malevich lived, collectivization and its traumatic effects would have been significantly more challenging to perceive with any sense of the overarching scope of the tragedy. It was a question of media exposure and of which voices could narrate the story of the present. That narration had much more to do with peasant identity than it did with collectivization.

The point should be made here that Malevich in no way subscribed to the Bolshevik promise for the future that accompanied the eminently-visible transformation of the peasantry into an artifact of ideology. The case I am making about Malevich's depictions of peasants and popular visual culture is not one of ideological agendas but rather of vocabulary and intertextuality. The popular peasant type pervaded visual culture during the era when Malevich produced his late peasant works. As such, the late peasant works participate in the broader cultural conversation which employed this terminology. Rather than a question of influence or intention, I propose that Malevich's images of peasants constitute evidence of the interconnectedness of popular culture, politics, and high art. They are texts that manifest such intertextual intersections within Soviet culture during the early Stalinist era.

How much the employment of such vocabulary represented a conscious choice, and what motivations may have determined such a choice, remain questions with no clear answers. Malevich's student Rozhdestvensky related, "Kazimir was an accumulator [*akkumulyator*] . . . with him it was a situation where he would amass, save up, put stuff by, and every

now and then he would feel as if he had been fully stocked-up."[32] Might we interpret this as if Malevich were a sort of charging device (*akkumulyator* can also mean "battery"), taking up energy in the form of visual material, to the point at which an expenditure of the accumulated and reimagined imagery could be released? Or does such an accumulating device only apply to formal principles and experiments, completely detached from iconography?

In the late 1920s, Malevich found himself in an increasingly unstable professional situation. He had returned to the Soviet Union in 1927 with what appears to have been some urgency. The state-funded position to which he returned for his main employment in 1928 was eliminated, along with the entire department which housed it, in 1929. The part-time teaching position in Kiev to which he traveled regularly was rescinded in 1930.[33] Also in 1930, Malevich was detained for three months by Soviet authorities under the suspicion of spying for Germany. By his personal account, he was interrogated with questions that used his artistic proclivities towards "Cézannism" and Cubism as accusatory weapons. Malevich noted that his critics had come to associate the disease of Formalism as having its foundation in his work and artistic identity – believing that without his presence, Formalism could finally be eradicated from Soviet art once and for all. But, he wrote, "they didn't destroy me. . . . It's not so easy to get rid of Malevich."[34] It is clear that his overall artistic priorities were still very much guided by his formal interests. But are we to believe that these were his only concerns in formulating these paintings, and, if so, should such formal priorities fully determine our interpretation of his choices?

In the context of this inconsistently overt persecution, Malevich painted images of everyday, salt-of-the-earth people – the same kind of people whom he saw represented in the state-approved popular visual culture of the era. Is it possible that Malevich believed, somewhat naively, that producing more images of peasants would help cloud the legacy of his Formalism, his style of pure abstraction that was so distasteful to Soviet critics or those who interrogated him on the nature of his "Cézannism"?

If so, the images of peasants might bolster the proletarian quota, so to speak, of his painting career – to tip the scales and balance out the excesses of his devotion to formal abstraction. These paintings of 1928-1932 could be read as evidence of a futile attempt on Malevich's part to

32. Vakar and Mikhienko, *Malevich o sebe*, 2: 305.

33. Yevgenia Petrova, ed., *Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum* (St. Petersburg: State Russian Museum and Palace Editions, 2000), p. 438.

34. Charlotte Douglas, "Biographical Outline," *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician*, p. 24.

render himself more politically acceptable within a context that posited the common experiences of everyday people as the rhetorical litmus test for the value of any political policy, publicly proclaimed position, or popularly-disseminated visual imagery. Nonetheless, Malevich continued to be marginalized from the state-supported art world over the next few years. Just a month before his death in 1935, his by then meager stipend was revoked entirely, leaving his family destitute. If any of his efforts were directed at influencing the decisions of powerful agents in the Soviet art world, those efforts failed.

However, another strategy for reading the 1928-1932 paintings' peasant subject matter could completely contradict a narrative which posits a desire (even a latent or unconscious one) on the artist's part to ingratiate himself, by means doomed to failure, to Soviet authorities. This interpretive strategy hinges upon the significant divergence of his peasants from the visual vocabulary of popular culture. Malevich's peasant images were not propagandistic. His peasants were not collective farm workers or *kolkhoznitsi*, nor did they possess tractors as attributes. Malevich's peasants were firmly entrenched in a nostalgia that drew upon the artist's own childhood and early adult life. His imagination conjured images of hearty peasant women wielding sickles and Russian Orthodox men wearing thick traditional beards. By contrast, the peasants Malevich saw depicted in Soviet newspapers and posters were no longer peasants. They represented the agricultural proletariat that would create a prosperous Soviet economic future. On the other hand, the schematized folk he depicted in his peasant paintings bore the yoke of Russia's centuries-long pre-industrialized agrarian heritage, cultivating strips of land traditionally allocated by the *mir*.

Could Malevich have been sensitive to such a distinction, or aware of how his works could or could not conform to the Stalinist agenda for the peasantry? There are no clear answers to such questions, and they are largely irrelevant, since the evidence in his writings indicates he was not in the least bit interested in any such considerations. It is likely that Malevich would have thought that these sorts of questions completely missed the point of his work, the motivations for which were much loftier and existential than such mundanities. However, the argument I have been making in this essay has little to do with the artist's personal motivations, and far more to do with the complex interactions between the paintings themselves and their popular visual cultural contexts. How or why the artist chose to embrace figurative subject matter, not to mention such highly politically-charged subject matter, exceeds the scope of my argument. However, what I have demonstrated is that with these works, Malevich did shift suddenly to an unmistakably figurative and politically relevant

iconography, despite the absence of considerations of politics in any of his earlier works or contemporary writing. I have argued that the paintings and their multiple contexts create notable intertextual correspondences regardless of the artist's own thinking or verbal expressions thereof.

What I have relied upon in this essay has largely been the "texts" that the painting themselves constitute. And as such, Malevich's paintings of peasants were, at immediate face value, representative of a certain sense of national identity as embodied in the people who worked the soil of that nation. Yet on a more subtle and contextually-inflected level, they remain remarkably subversive, for objects created in 1928 and later. They refute the artificially-imposed framing of the iconography of contemporary visual culture, and they expose the character of the Russian peasant as significantly more complex than a caricatured *baba*. Malevich's peasants assert viewers' rights to define for themselves the nature of Russia's heritage, rather than a vision imposed by the state. These paintings thereby chip at the very base of the Bolshevik attempt to remake peasant policy. They reject the image of the *kolkhoznitsa* by proffering images derived from traditional peasant ways, obscured by modernist abstraction. In the new Soviet iconography of the *kolkhoznitsa*, there existed but one type of alternative to her form: the ignorant, sabotaging, money- and property-grubbing *baba*. To produce competing images reflecting the traditional nature of peasant existence posed a substantial threat to the binary upon which Soviet propaganda was built.

By revealing the emptiness of the new Soviet iconography of female peasants, Malevich's paintings disrupted the tenuous semiotic system upon which Stalinism operated. His works dissimulated the propagandistic simulation. Regardless of whether these works contributed class-appropriate images to Malevich's portfolio, to expose the rhetorical structures underlying Stalinist propaganda meant to question Stalinist policy itself.

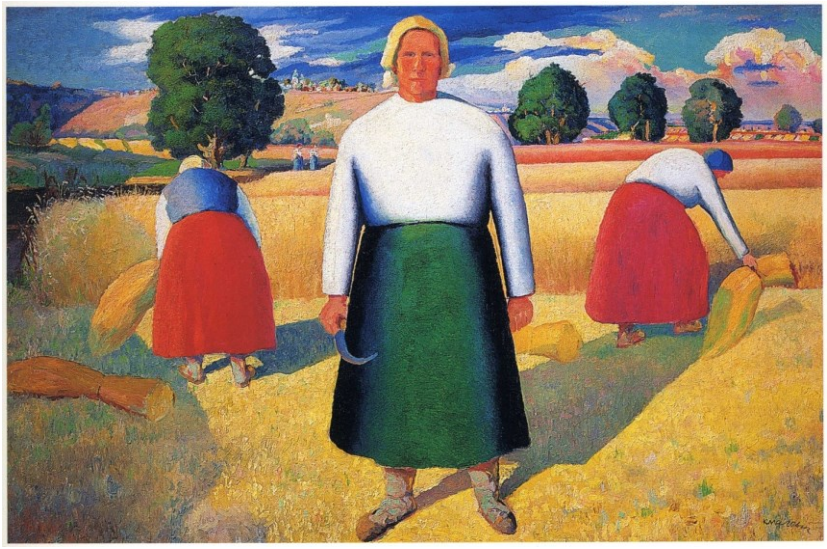

Figure 1. Kazimir Malevich, *Women Reapers* (1928-1929, Russian Museum Ж-9450).

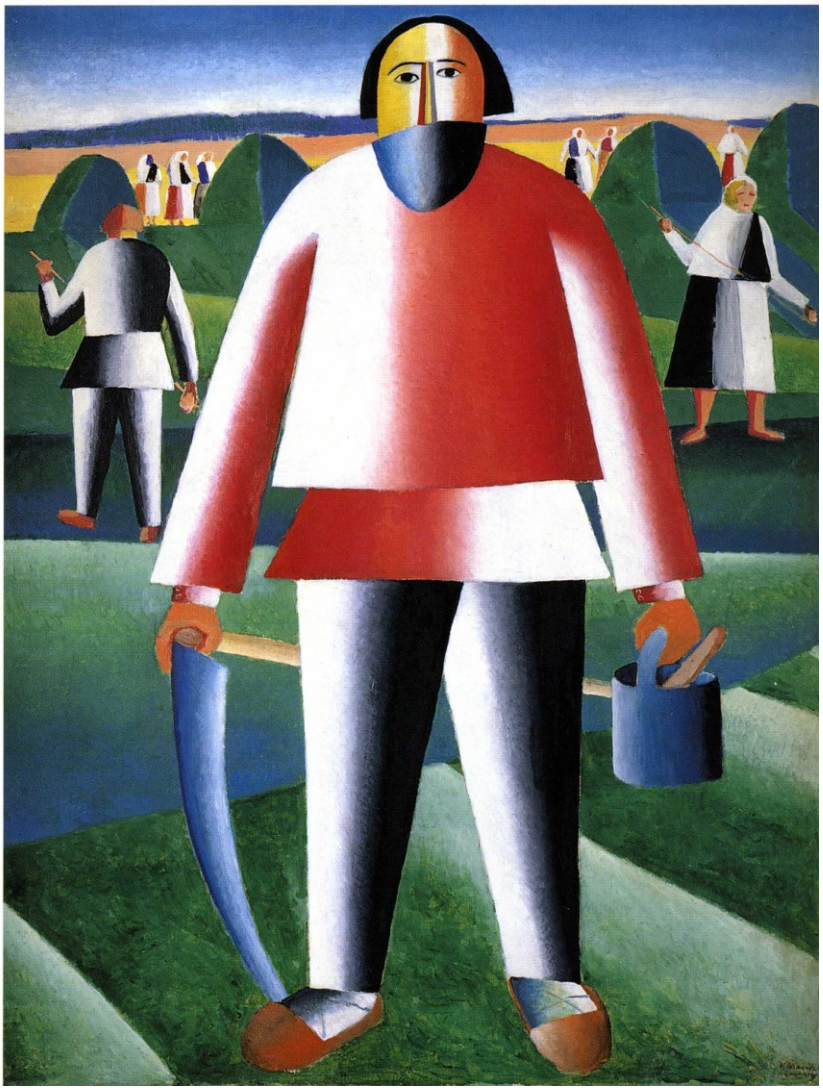

Figure 2. Kazimir Malevich, *Haymaking* (1928-1929, Tretiakov Gallery Inv. 10612).

Figure 3. Kazimir Malevich, *Girls in a Field* (1928-1929, Russian Museum Ж-9433).

Figure 4. Kazimir Malevich, *Flower Seller* (1930, Russian Museum ЖБ-1502).

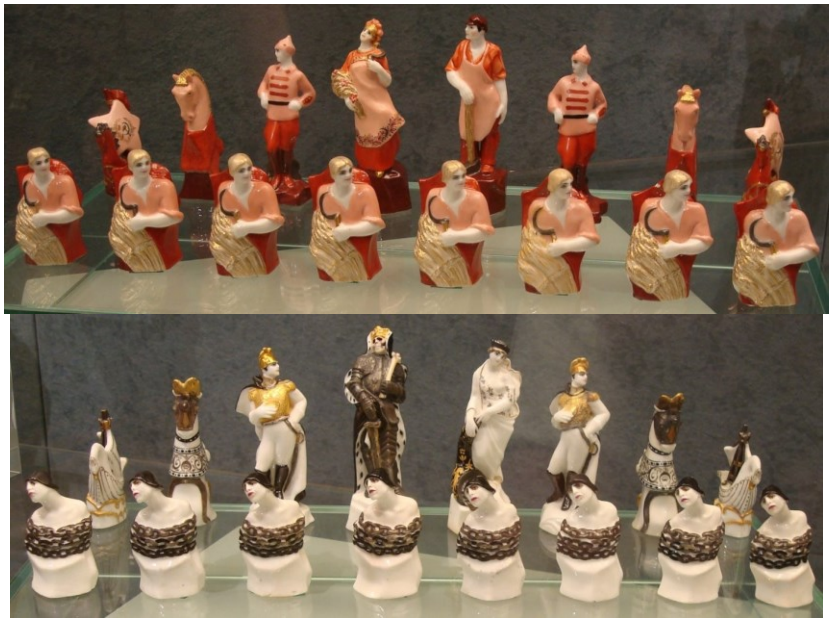

Figure 5: N.Ya. Dan'ko and A.A. Skvortsov, *Red and White Chess Set* (1925, Museum of Decorative and Folk Art, Moscow).
Photo credit: author.